Restorative Approaches Implementation for School Equity in Vermont (RISE-VT): Final Report

Submitted to the State of Vermont – Agency of Education
January 31, 2023

Coordination Team and Project Partners:

Valerie F. Wood, Ph.D.
University of Vermont

Lindsey Halman, M.Ed.
UP for Learning

Amy Wheeler-Sutton, M.Ed.
University of Vermont

Jon Kidde, MSW
Green OMEGA, L3C

Ned Castle
Frames to Life
Executive Summary

This report summarizes the accomplishments of the Restorative Approaches Implementation for School Equity in Vermont (or RISE-VT) project. This project was funded by a contract from the Vermont Agency of Education and ran from November 2021 to January 2023. Project implementation and evaluation was guided by the Coordination Team, which consisted of Lindsey Halman, M.Ed., from UP for Learning, Amy Wheeler-Sutton, M.Ed., from the BEST Project at the University of Vermont, and Valerie Wood, Ph.D., Research Assistant Professor at the Center on Disability and Community Inclusion at the University of Vermont. The Coordination Team also worked closely with two Project Partners: Jon Kidde, MSW, from Green OMEGA consulting, and Ned Castle, from Frames to Life. Jon Kidde was the lead developer for the restorative approaches (RA) online learning module. Ned Castle is a professional filmmaker and videographer who coordinated the documentation of the history and use of restorative approaches at the four selected sites. This report summarizes highlights, challenges, and the team’s vision for the future as it relates to the following components of the project: (1) Forming the Community of Practice (CoP), (2) Creating the E-Learning Module, (3) Documentation and Ethnography Efforts, and (4) Convening the Vermont Restorative Approaches Collaborative (VTRAC). Based on the authors’ experience working with the four sites on this project, we offer the following considerations in regard to future efforts to advance restorative approaches in Vermont’s education system.
Recommendations for Advancing Restorative Approaches in Vermont

1. **We recommend that schools and other stakeholders examine how the implementation of RA aligns with other requirements they are being asked to fulfill.**

   Restorative approaches directly align with other recommendations put forth by the Vermont Agency of Education, including the VTmtss framework, Healthy and Safe Schools, Act 67: Community Schools, and the recent Act 35 report and recommendations.

2. **We recommend that school leaders ensure that staff who participate in projects such as this receive the necessary support to fully participate in the work of the project.** This includes staffing support that allows them to “put aside” their day-to-day responsibilities so they can fully attend to and engage in the activities designed to move their practice forward, including, but not limited to, professional development trainings, team meetings, and individualized coaching support.

3. **We recommend that schools and other stakeholders consider how we, as a state, can provide long-term, sustainable funding for the scale-up of this work.** This work is powerful and transformational. When done well, it leads to the creation of a more equitable, inclusive, and just education system. As the team experienced, it also takes an investment of time and resources, such as ongoing access to professional development and coaching.
4. **We recommend that schools review the materials that were created as part of this scope of work.** Even schools that do not feel ready to begin the process of RA implementation can benefit from an introduction to the key concepts of restorative approaches through the e-learning modules, access to resources through the VTRAC website, and being aware of the VTRAC membership directory.

5. **We recommend that the VTRAC pursue long-term funding to support and ensure sustainability of the efforts of the organization.** The VTRAC continues to be an important contributor to this work throughout the state, with experts that are knowledgeable about both 1) the “whys” and “hows” of restorative approaches and 2) the specifics of Vermont’s educational landscape. Moving forward, long-term funding and sustainability of the VTRAC will ensure that schools continue to have access to experts in this field.

**Forming the Community of Practice**

**Overview**

In order to assist schools with deepening their understanding of restorative approaches and implementing school-wide restorative practices, the RISE-VT Coordination Team utilized evidence-based best practices (e.g., Darling-Hammond, Hyler, Gardner, & Espinoza, 2017) in professional training by providing support to the selected sites in several ways. Support included the formation of a Community of Practice (CoP), site-specific coaching, and video documentation of the sites’ use of restorative approaches.

Nineteen sites were initially nominated for participation. Because the focus of this project was to help schools *further* develop their *existing* restorative approaches, the Coordination Team
narrowed down the nominees to four final sites. The final four sites were carefully selected based on (1) recommendations from members of the VTRAC, (2) consideration for geographic and grade/age diversity amongst the sites, (3) responses to a readiness assessment, and (4) sites’ self-reports of their capacity to engage in this work. The four participating sites included:

1. Burlington School District (BSD), serving students in grades PK-12
2. Proctor Junior/Senior High School, serving students in grades 7-12
3. Twinfield Union School, serving students in grades PK-12
4. Wolcott Elementary School, serving schools K-6

Leadership Teams from each site met for a total of six times over the course of the project: twice in the Spring of 2022 (4/11/22, 5/19/22) and four times in the Fall of 2022 (9/16/22, 9/28/22, 10/12/22, 11/2/22). Planning and facilitation of the CoP Sessions was provided by Jon Kidde, Annie O'Shaughnessy, and Shari Garn. The goals of the CoP sessions were to support schools to:

- articulate a clear vision of their school-wide restorative approaches (SWRA) goals;
- move forward on the implementation journey – understanding where they currently were and where they wanted to go;
- name and leverage existing assets and resources and gather additional support needed;
- develop relationships across sites and strengthen networks of support;
- access resources to support their RA journey during RISE-VT and beyond;
- bring inspiration and encouragement back to their sites;
- establish or strengthen a school/SU/SD team to guide restorative approaches;
- and showcase knowledge and skills needed to create a SWRA system.

Please note that the agendas for the four Fall CoP sessions are publicly available for schools to use and schools are encouraged to borrow from these resources.
Highlights

One of the highlights from creating the Community of Practice was the intentionality behind the selection of sites that participated in the project. The Coordination Team felt it was important to work with schools of diverse grade levels and geographic characteristics. The Coordination Team celebrates the fact that this project demonstrates that any type of school, from elementary to high schools, serving students that live in very rural to urban environments, can engage in the work of restorative approaches. Evaluation data from the CoP sessions also provides insight into what was successful, which is discussed in more detail in the next section.

Evaluation & Feedback from CoP Participants

Evaluation & Feedback on Sessions 1 through 5

After each of the CoP sessions, participants were asked to complete a feedback form. The questions on the form included four quantitative items designed to capture participants satisfaction with the session and four open-ended qualitative questions that provided input to the design of the remaining CoP sessions. The same evaluation questions were used across the first five CoP sessions. These questions were:

On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 representing “Strongly Disagree” and 5 representing “Strongly Agree,” how much do you agree with each of the following statements:

1. The meeting facilitation was organized and effective.
2. I left the meeting with clear action steps to move the work forward with my team.
3. Today’s meeting was a good use of my time.
4. Overall, I was satisfied with my experience at the first Community of Practice meeting.

Additionally, the following qualitative questions were asked:
1. What action steps have you identified that you will be taking with your team to move this work forward?
2. What aspects of today’s meeting were most useful to you?
3. What aspects of today’s meeting could have been improved?
4. Are there specific topics or resources that would be helpful for us to share with you? If so, what are they?

For this final report, note that data from all five sessions has been combined. A more elaborate evaluation survey was administered after the sixth and final CoP session and that data is reported on separately in the next section of this report. Across the five sessions, participants provided a total of 34 responses to the evaluation survey. There were 12 responses to the Session 1 Feedback Survey, 9 responses to the Session 2 Feedback Survey, 12 responses to the Session 3 Feedback Survey, and 1 response to the Session 5 Feedback Survey. Note that the turnout was very low for Session 4 and, therefore, the Coordination Team and facilitators pivoted in response to the needs of school team members. As a result, no feedback survey data was collected for that session. In terms of representation of the sites, 1 response was provided by a BSD team member, 9 responses were provided by Proctor team members, 13 responses were provided by Twinfield team members, 5 responses were provided by Wolcott team members, and 6 responses were provided by other attendees (e.g., members of the VTRAC). Note that the number of responses provided by teams should not be interpreted as an indicator of project involvement, as the size of teams varied across sites (minimum team size of one to maximum team size of 20). Figure 1 below summarizes the quantitative data collected from the first five CoP sessions.
Figure 1

*Participants Mean Evaluation and Satisfaction Scores*

Overall, mean scores for participants were above the neutral point of 3.0, indicating satisfaction with the organization and experience of attending the CoP sessions. The highest mean score was for the first item and qualitative comments provided additional insight into participants’ thinking. For example, when asked in an open-ended question, “What aspects of the day’s meeting were most useful to you?” five participants indicated the modeling of circle practices. One participant shared the following: “The reminder of how powerful circles can be for having difficult conversations and for being vulnerable. I think we had started to forget/give up on Restorative Practices, so this was a really great way to show how important it is that we keep going with this initiative.” Participants also appreciated it when “team time” was built into the CoP meetings to give them opportunities to prioritize this work as a team, as participants often felt like they were being pulled away from this work outside of our CoP meeting times.
Evaluation & Feedback on the Overall Experience

After the sixth and final Community of Practice session, site team members were asked to complete an evaluation of their experience in its totality. A total of seven responses were received. There was one response from BSD, one response from Proctor Jr/Sr High School, two responses from Twinfield, one response from Wolcott, two responses from other supporters of this work (e.g., VTRAC members), and one individual preferred not to identify themself. Teams were asked to what extent they were able to include youth on their team. Five respondents indicated that they were able to include youth on their team for the *entire duration* of the project, two indicated that they were able to include youth on their team for *part of the duration* of the project, and two indicated that they *were not able to include youth* on their team for any portion of the project.

As part of their final exit survey, participants were asked to provide self-ratings of their understanding and confidence in applying restorative approaches before and after participating in this work. Participants were also asked to rate the extent to which they had been including youth in this work before participating and after participating. Figure 2 provides a summary of changes in these pre and post self-ratings.

Participants self-ratings of RA understanding and confidence in RA application increased, on average, by half a point on a 5-point Likert scale. These results indicate that participants felt they experienced modest gains in their understanding and confidence applying restorative approaches as a result of their participation in the many facets of this project. It is important to note, however, that due to the small sample size, statistical significance tests were not conducted on these measures, limiting the conclusions that can be drawn from these results. The following qualitative comment helps put the nature of one of these limitations in
perspective: “Please note - our team’s understanding before and after this project was all over the place . . . I answered questions from my perspective of where I was at.”

**Figure 2**

Changes in Self-Ratings of RA Understanding, Application, and Youth Inclusion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHANGES IN PRE TO POST SCORES</th>
<th>(1 = NONE TO 5 = A GREAT DEAL)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RA UNDERSTANDING</td>
<td>4.17 4.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RA APPLICATION</td>
<td>3.67 4.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YOUTH INCLUSION</td>
<td>2.83 2.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre Post</td>
<td>Pre Post</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Challenges**

In addition to the successes that we achieved through this work together, the Coordination Team also wanted to reflect on aspects of this work that was challenging, in the hopes that transparently discussing these challenges will inform future efforts to support the work of implementing restorative approaches in schools, school districts, and supervisory unions. One challenge that the Coordination Team experienced was the timeline of the contract. For example, the contract start date (November 2021) did not align with the start of the school year, the state fiscal year, or the calendar year. Asking schools to consider signing onto the project in
the middle of the school year, while they were still navigating the pandemic, was a barrier to their engagement. Furthermore, best practices from implementation science indicate that for real systems change to occur, these initiatives need to be supported for multiple years (for recommendations specific to restorative approaches see Gregory & Evans, 2020).

The timing of the contract also led to challenges in maintaining momentum over the course of the summer months. The first two CoP sessions were facilitated in the spring of 2022 and were well attended (e.g., The initial meeting had 18 attendees), but sites struggled to make time to attend the four CoP sessions offered in the fall. In an effort to be responsive to the needs of the teams, the Coordination Team and Project Partners reviewed the evaluation feedback. Challenges that were identified by the teams included:

1. “Zoom” fatigue: “Being on Zoom is not the best use of the team. We decided to only send one representative next time and just meet on our own.”

2. Competing demands for their time: “I was at times confused as to what we were supposed to be doing, especially in the beginning, but I also had to step out for a few moments, so I’m sure that didn’t help.”

3. Difficulty in engaging youth partners in this work: “The mindfulness section, though ultimately helpful and important, went on for a really long time. People (especially students) lost interest.”

These comments are indicative of some of the challenging circumstances that were co-occurring as we engaged with the teams. The third point is also represented in the pre- and post-survey data presented in Figure 2 above. The pre- and post-self-ratings on teams’ inclusion of youth remained static over the course of the project. An examination of pre- and post-scores by site revealed that while some sites made reported a small amount of growth, other sites
experienced a decrease in youth participation. Upon reflection, the Coordination Team and Project Partners recognized that some sites were still in the early phase of their restorative approaches implementation and that teams were stretched too thin when they were trying to build school-wide support for this work among teachers, administrators, and students simultaneously. Some of the sites had also had previous experience working in youth-adult partnerships and had done significant work to explore the dominant cultural mindset in most schools regarding youth involvement, engagement in decision-making and leadership, and how they could work together as a team to build greater school-wide support.

Another challenge was that there was some degree of role confusion for coaches related to the design and participation in the CoP sessions. While some coaches were also facilitators who were paid for the time to design the material, not all coaches were involved in the design. In retrospect, all coaches should have been more involved in design since they were working directly with sites. The Coordination Team recognizes that the coaches held important firsthand knowledge of the issues and needs teams were expressing and the coaches’ insights would have enriched the CoP planning process. Unfortunately, the budget did not include funding to support time from all the coaches in planning and designing the CoP sessions.

Lastly, the Coordination Team noted that there were wide discrepancies in how the sites utilized their coaching support and how many of those coaching hours were actually used. In retrospect, the Coordination Team wonders if it would have been helpful to have a conversation with each site’s leadership team, asking them to envision how they would like to engage with their coach and assisting them with making a specific plan to do so as part of this work.
Vision for the Future

Based on these successes and challenges, the Coordination Team has the following recommendations for engaging with schools, school districts, and supervisory unions to carry out this work in the future. The Coordination Team recommends that future CoP sessions be designed and facilitated by the coaches working directly with each site. Based on feedback the Coordination Team received in the evaluation surveys, it is recommended that designers balance the design and intention of future CoP sessions by having some CoP sessions that are designed for all participating sites and having some CoP sessions be site specific. Site specific sessions should include a discussion of how teams are currently engaging with youth and creating action steps to increase authentic youth engagement in this process. It is also recommended that facilitators are intentional about building in opportunities for team time, either during CoP sessions, or as an additional component of support. Additionally, it is recommended that future designs intentionally create more opportunities for school-to-school connections and learning. For example, by creating a structure for schools to share successes and/or workshop challenges as they engage in this work. Lastly, as society continues to navigate and define what is “normal” post-pandemic, the Coordination Team recommends a return to in-person presentation and attendance for components like the CoP sessions. While virtual meetings were the right choice for the six CoP sessions held during this contract due to ongoing concerns about COVID-19, participants (and facilitators) acknowledge that the relational aspects of this work are not served well through virtual participation.
Creating the E-Learning Module

Overview

The e-learning module developed under this project will help schools understand the possibilities inherent in School-Wide Restorative Approaches (SWRA). The module provides an overview of SWRA that aims to enhance resilience and positive school culture while prioritizing relationship-based pedagogies, justice and equity, youth voice, and well-being for students, teachers, and families. The module can be completed individually or in a group with other faculty and staff at a school in about two hours. Throughout the module, there are opportunities to reflect, test knowledge, and explore how schools can take steps to prepare for school-wide restorative practice implementation. Below is an outline of the module:

Why Restorative Approaches?

- Restorative Approaches in Vermont

What is School-Wide Restorative Approaches?

- Fundamentals of School-Wide Restorative Approaches
- Restorative Mindset
- Youth Voice and Partnerships

Steps to Implementing School-Wide Restorative Approaches

- How to explore, install, and begin to implement SWRA

Additional Information

- Additional Activities and Resources

The e-learning module was an important deliverable of the contract and is publicly available on VTRAC’s Resource page: [Restorative Approaches Learning Modules](#).
Highlights

From the outset, the Coordination Team and Project Partners, including the Agency of Education, were very excited about the effort to create the learning module. The learning module provides sustainability of reach and education for schools that are exploring RA implementation that extends beyond the scope and timeline of the contract. As mentioned above, the module is designed to be completed individually or as a group at their own pace. The module includes opportunities for participants to apply their learning, helping the individual or group to take the first small steps to exploring implementation. Furthermore, the original intention was to create a single module that provided an introduction to restorative approaches for schools that wanted to learn more. The team went beyond the original scope of work and developed a multi-faceted, high-quality module, that incorporates findings from research, experience of restorative approaches experts in Vermont, feedback from the field, including youth, and incorporates video footage from Vermont’s schools.

Based upon the collective experience of the facilitators and coaches for the project, it was important to highlight the stories of Vermont schools and showcase how Vermont schools have successfully integrated restorative approaches into their day-to-day activities. Research has shown that individuals are more likely to feel confident in their ability to try something new when a “similar enough” exemplar is provided (e.g., Gartzia, Morgenroth, Ryan, & Peters, 2021). Therefore, the Coordination Team and Project Partners are excited that videography material was interwoven into the RA learning module. The Coordination Team believes that when other Vermont schools are able to see this work being done in neighboring schools, school districts, and supervisory unions, it will increase the likelihood that they will embrace restorative approaches themselves.
For all of these reasons, the Coordination Team anticipates that the learning module will act as an important “gateway” for schools, school districts, and supervisory unions to explore what restorative approaches are and how they can begin their own journey to implementation. The learning module is also an extension of the Agency of Education’s previous investment in the area of restorative approaches, building upon the Restorative Approaches Resource Guide published in 2017.

Challenges

Challenges specific to the creation of the e-learning module included the timeline, as mentioned above. In particular, it was challenging wrap up the e-learning module at the same time as the videography effort, since the videography effort fed into the e-learning module. Ideally, the videography effort would have been complete before the e-learning module was finalized. Additionally, a longer timeline with more sustainable funding would have allowed for the collection of additional feedback and deeper conversations with those in the field (including youth) regarding what should be represented in the e-learning module. Lastly, there is some confusion around ownership of the e-learning module and who will hold responsibility for managing some of the feedback participants will generate.

Vision for the Future

The Coordination Team is interested in exploring ways to continue to document and showcase examples from Vermont schools with continuity and evolution of restorative approaches over time in schools. The Coordination Team is also interested in exploring ways to partner with the Agency of Education to understand the reach of the e-learning module and feedback that is received from users of the module.
Documentation & Ethnography Efforts

Overview

The scope of the site documentation was originally planned to involve three sites, with approximately thirty site visits to be undertaken over the course of the project period. The extension of the project period, along with in-kind contributions of time by the documentation partner, Frames to Life (Ned Castle), allowed for documentation to occur at all four school sites, including 48 documentation site visits.

Highlights

The four documentation sites—Burlington School District (BSD), Proctor Jr./Sr. High School, Wolcott Elementary, and Twinfield Union School—were selected to explore, and ultimately demonstrate restorative practice implementation along a continuum from schools in the early phases (e.g., Wolcott, Twinfield) to schools and districts with a longer history of implementation (e.g., BSD, Proctor).

In terms of documentation deliverable (i.e., videos), the project had initially scoped to produce one summary video at each site for a total of three videos (each under 10 minutes). During the early phases of documentation, the production team gathered two insights from the sites that initiated a shift in the format of the deliverables. First, sites expressed interest in seeing the “nitty gritty” of how other sites were working—not just the high-level takeaways. Second, members of the teams reported that “exemplar” videos on RP that they’d seen in the past, in the context of RP training, had actually been discouraging because of the gap that existed between the advanced RP activity they viewed in the videos and the challenges they were experiencing in their own attempts at implementation. Several educators flagged that it would have been helpful
to see examples of less polished RP implementation—and how educators, students, and staff navigated the inherent challenges of the process.

In response to these two insights, the documentation team made the decision to shift the format of the videos from producing a comprehensive overview at each site—to producing several snapshot videos, showing in greater detail the activities of the implementation teams at given points in their implementation process. Note that, at the time of this report submission, the final versions of the videos are being reviewed by each site and sites’ permissions for sharing the videos publicly are pending. These videos will be premiered at the upcoming Restorative Approaches in Vermont Showcase on Feb. 7, 2023, from 12 - 1. And it is anticipated that all videos will be finalized by Feb. 28, 2023. When finalized, all videos will be housed here and on the Vermont Restorative Approaches website. The Coordination Team, in conjunction with Ned Castle, from Frames to Life, will inform the Agency of Education when the final videos have been uploaded to those sites.

Challenges

The documentation team faced several challenges that impacted the timeline of the project, but not the quality/scope of the activities or deliverables:

- School staff and student capacity post-COVID was stretched thin at the outset of the project period, and it took longer to identify and confirm participation from the sites. As a result, the necessary conversations around permissions and logistics of in-school video documentation began later than planned.
- Navigating differences in school policy and culture around video documentation of students and staff, meant that documentation began much earlier at some sites, than at others. Additionally, at some sites, the documentation team visited 3-4 times to build
relationships, trust, and acquire student/staff releases before filming could begin. This was an unplanned use of time that did not ultimately impact the documentation as the team provided additional in-kind services to the project.

- Balancing the resources to perform in-depth documentation at four sites, as opposed to three, stretched the capacity of the team. In the end, the team committed additional in-kind resources to the project.

- As a part of the documentation agreement, students and staff were given the opportunity to review and approve final contents in the videos—a process that delayed the delivery timeline of the videos.

**Vision for the Future**

The precursor to effective ethnographic documentation and subsequent storytelling, is relationship building and trust—both to facilitate access and the comfort needed to capture people’s actions and perspectives in an authentic manner. This project was a significant investment in relationship-building at each of the sites that has laid the groundwork for ongoing longitudinal documentation that has the potential to yield invaluable insights and professional development resources around RP implementation in Vermont. At present, the barrier to realizing this opportunity is additional funding to support the programmatic and documentation work at the sites.

That said, the documentation that was undertaken and the video resources that were produced can now be used to promote and advance RP work around the state through sharing these videos at trainings, convenings, etc. The videos will be made available to the school sites and anyone in Vermont, and beyond, that is interested in learning more about the RP journey ongoing in our state.
Convening the VTRAC

Overview

An additional component of this project was to convene the Vermont Restorative Approaches Collaborative or VTRAC. The VTRAC was formed during the initial contract from the Vermont AoE that funded the Restorative Approaches Professional Learning initiative (August 2019 - December 2020). The VTRAC is a grassroots organization consisting of a wide variety of professionals who have expertise in or are interested in advancing the use of Restorative Approaches in Vermont and beyond. The VTRAC serves as a source of expertise, anchored in the specifics of the Vermont state context, for schools and other organizations that want to deepen their knowledge and implementation of RA. In addition to providing a directory of RA practitioners and experts, the VTRAC website includes a virtual library of resources. Both of these components of the website provide important resources to our local schools. You can learn more about the VTRAC, including the directory and virtual library, here: https://vtrac.org/.

Highlights

During this contract, the Coordination Team convened the VTRAC three times (1/26/2022, 5/3/2022, and 8/11/2022). The purpose of our meetings was (1) to share updates and information, including updates on this project, (2), share promising practices from the field, and (3) to connect professionally. As an additional connection point, UP for Learning, through the leadership of Lindsey Halman, M.Ed., launched a bi-monthly\(^1\) Lunch & Learn series, in which members of the VTRAC are invited to lead or participate in an activity that draws upon principles of Restorative Approaches. Two Lunch & Learn sessions have been held so far.

\(^1\) In this instance bi-monthly refers to occurring every other month.
(9/20/2022 and 11/15/2022). In September, Dr. Valerie Wood led the participants through an exercise on identifying their core values and in November, Annie O’Shaughnessy facilitated a conversation titled “Emergent Strategy: Exploring the Principles Together.” For the September session, 10 participants attended and for the November session, 13 participants registered with 5 attending. The next Lunch & Learn will be held on Feb. 7, at which the Coordination Team and Project Partners will be showcasing the learning modules and videography components of this contract.

**Challenges**

The VTRAC is a fairly new organization, and like any newly formed group, the primary challenge is to clarify roles and responsibilities. Specifically, who has the responsibility of “holding” the group moving forward? Although the group grew out of the work of the initial contract and continued under this contract, like the e-learning module, this is a component of the work together that will continue to live beyond the contract. As an organization of people who are passionate about RA, the group was and is built around the principles of equity and inclusion of voice. Therefore, there is no sense of “ownership” built into the creation of the organization. And while that sense of equal partnership and lack of ownership is in line with the group’s values, it leaves open the question of who is responsible for organizing the efforts of the Collaborative moving forward.

**Vision for the Future**

As the Coordination Team looks to the future, we are left with the question of what is the right “home” for the VTRAC? Some possibilities that the Coordination Team has discussed are UP for Learning, Vermont Law School, or “staying the course” and keeping the conversation going as needed. In the near future, UP for Learning is willing to continue to convene the bi-
monthly Lunch & Learns, which are emerging as an important touch point for group connection. Additionally, the Coordination Team will continue to search out and apply for long-term, sustainable funding that could support the work of the VTRAC and the advancement of RA in Vermont.

**Conclusion**

**Highlights**

In reviewing the overall work of the Coordination Team and the Project Partners, the following reflections stand out as highlights to celebrate. Despite the challenging timeframe and the continuing effects of the pandemic on school systems, the team successfully engaged all four sites in this work. In keeping with our team’s commitment to elevating youth voice, three out of four sites included youth membership. As part of this work, all teams were asked to brainstorm how they could increase authentic youth involvement in transforming the culture at their schools. This kind of “thought experiment” is one strategy that can be used to support educators in considering, planning for, and committing to lasting change in their classroom practices (e.g. Clark, 2013).

Engagement in this work also included capturing video documentation from all four sites regarding their site's unique journey in implementing restorative approaches. Because there is no “one size fits all” approach to implementing RA, the video documentation efforts, including that which was incorporated into the learning module, provide a variety of examples to other Vermont schools in how to get started in their schools, school districts, or supervisory unions. Importantly, three out of four sites will continue their work beyond this contract (Burlington School District, Proctor Junior /Senior High School, and Wolcott Elementary School), despite ongoing questions about sustainable funding for this kind of work.
The Coordination team also drew upon lessons learned from our first restorative approaches contract, and recognized that regular (bi-monthly\(^2\)) meetings were instrumental to the planning, implementing, and reflecting on our progress in fulfilling the scope of work of the contract. Note that once a month the meeting included the Coordination Team members and once a month the meeting included the Coordination Team and Project Partners, including our Agency of Education partner, Caitlin Chisholm. Through the participation of our Project Partners, the team was able to successfully collaborate on the timeline, launch of the Community of Practice, creation of the learning module, completion of the videography efforts, and convening of the VTRAC. Furthermore, the participation of our AoE partner allowed us to discuss and coordinate logistical issues related to the contract start and end date, gain clarity on expectations from the AoE, and work to ensure alignment with VTmtss.

The Coordination team also drew upon lessons learned from the first contract in terms of planning for our compensation to coaches, trainers, and facilitators. The team drew upon our previous experience and solicited information from coaches, trainers, and facilitators prior to submitting our proposal in order to prepare a budget that provided a fair rate of compensation to all who were supporting this work. The Coordination Team also recognized that the VTRAC members, whether they were participating formally (i.e. as paid coaches or facilitators) or informally (i.e. as VTRAC members attending events) in this project, continue to be foundational to this transformational work in Vermont. Therefore, the team celebrates the ways in which the VTRAC continued to connect through this contract, including through participation in the CoPs,

\(^2\) In this case bi-monthly refers to our team meetings that happened twice a month or approximately every two weeks.
Lunch & Learns, and retreats, including a whole day at the Summer Institute for Restorative Practices.

**Challenges**

In addition to the challenges discussed above, the Coordination Team did additional reflecting on the coaching aspect of this project. Coaching was both effective and challenging. As evidence of the effectiveness of coaching, when asked what component of this work was most valuable to their team on the final evaluation survey, two-thirds of respondents (or four out of six) indicated that the in-person coaching was “*most effective*” and “*fantastic.*” At the same time, when asked what some of the barriers to participation were, team members shared things like “*competing district initiatives*” and “*pandemic stress.*” As an additional example, in Burlington School District, the coaching hours provided by this contract allowed their coach to give an orientation to the Restorative Approaches specialists, many of whom were new to the district. At the same time, the BSD team, like other teams, felt that they did not have adequate time in their day/week/month to fully engage in this work and were unable to take advantage of all the coaching hours offered.

The Coordination Team, in meeting with coaches and the sites, realized that, at times, the priorities of the coaches may have been misaligned with the priorities of the sites. Future efforts should ensure that sites and coaches have sufficient time to discuss the site’s goals to make sure the coaches efforts align with the vision of the site’s leadership team. An additional lesson learned was that the Coordination Team should have developed clearer baseline, foundational expectations with coaches. While each coach and VTRAC member brings a different style and background knowledge to this work, it is important to balance the freedom to engage in this work in the way they choose with fidelity to best practices in restorative approaches.
implementation based on learning from the field and research. It is noteworthy that this dilemma is not unique to this contract and the need to balance fidelity of implementation with responsiveness to individual communities' circumstances has been highlighted in the restorative approaches literature (e.g. Gregory & Evans, 2020).

Vision for the Future

As the Coordination Team and Project Partners have reached the conclusion of this contract, the team reflected on the question “Where do we go from here?” At the beginning of our contract, we selected four sites, which while being in different places in their implementation journey, had all begun the process of RA implementation. Our goal was to provide additional, targeted support to: 1) help schools add additional restorative approaches to their repertoire, 2) build a community of support for RA practices in their sites and amongst each other in the form of the CoPs, 3) receive support from and engage in problem-solving with their coaches, and 4) have time to practice what they were learning onsite with their coaches.

A long-term goal of guiding schools in implementing restorative approaches is to provide schools with a research-based practice that reduces suspension and expulsion (Augustine et al., 2018). In keeping with a growing understanding of how RA helps prevent exclusionary discipline, it is worth noting that a number of VTRAC members (5) served on the Vermont Act 35 Task Force, providing expertise in the report on recommendations to reduce (and ultimately eliminate) the use of suspension and expulsion in Vermont. Due to the short timeline of this contract, it was beyond the current scope of work to examine long-term outcomes such as reduction in rates of suspension and expulsion at the four sites. Best practices based on research in implementation science has found that it takes between two (Riestenberg, 2015) to twenty years (Bauer & Kirchner, 2020) for an innovation to move from research to “standard practice.”
It is noteworthy that in their review of RA initiatives in the US, Gregory and Evans (2020) recommend that “funded evaluations should allow for a minimum of three to five years before outcomes are measured” (pg. 5). It is our hope that the Agency of Education will be able to provide future funding for a longer contract that would allow for a more rigorous implementation and evaluation methodology, or identify a sustainable funding stream that would support this work in schools on an ongoing basis.

Change takes time and providing ongoing funding would allow schools to engage in this work in a qualitatively different way. One site team member put it this way, “The coaching was invaluable. Glad we were able to find a way to continue this for at least a year, but really hope we can have continued support as our journey is just beginning.” To achieve long-lasting systems change, schools need support over time to build upon lessons learned from year to year, partly from seeing and experiencing the desired outcomes, such as creating a positive school climate (e.g. Short, Case, & McKenzie, 2018), and reducing the use of exclusionary discipline (e.g. Augustine et al., 2018). In addition to encouraging the AoE to identify longer-term funding for restorative approaches work in Vermont, the Coordination Team will continue to identify and pursue grants and contracts that situates this work in the “bigger picture,” such as school climate transformation grants.

With Appreciation

Lastly, the Coordination Team would like to thank all of those who participated, supported, and made this project possible. In this evaluation report, we chose to highlight not only our successes but the challenges of this work as well. We feel that many schools and RA specialists who are engaging in this work know, from their experience, that the work is “messy”
and rarely follows a “clean” trajectory from point A to B. In writing this report, we embraced the value of restorative approaches that elevates *authenticity of experience* over the *illusion of “perfection”* - a word that too often creates discouragement, as it is unattainable. We present our authentic experience in the hopes that other schools and sites can learn from what we have shared and will be encouraged to begin their own journey with restorative approaches.
References


